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Introduction

When I was a young Christian in my teens one of my Christian 'heroes' was an evangelist called Arthur Blessit. He was well known in the 70's for carrying a large wooden cross around and talking to people about it.

I recently read this news item from 2009

DENVER, April 10, 2009 — -- *Evangelist Arthur Blessitt made the Guinness Book of Records last year for completing the "world's longest walk": a 40 year, 38,102 mile trek around the world, all while carrying a 12-foot-high cross. His story has been turned into a documentary, "The Cross," He says this:* In the spring of 1968, I made a 12-foot-by-6-foot cross to hang on the wall of our Jesus Coffeehouse on Sunset Strip in Hollywood, California. The young people coming into the building were deeply touched to see a huge rugged cross. I would carry the cross on short trips along the streets of Hollywood and share with people the love of Jesus.

There is also a story of a man called Lindsay Hamon who has done a similar thing. The 61-year-old care worker carries a cross that weighs 25kg (55lb) on his shoulder. Made out of wood and with a wheel at the bottom, He has carried the cross throughout Britain and to remote parts of the world including Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. Over the last 26 years he has travelled over 5,000 miles.

"It started in a small way, Land's End to Plymouth," He explains "A few months later, Plymouth to London and then round Ireland... and then eventually London to Berlin, then Berlin to Moscow and Berlin to Paris and Slovakia and Hungary,".

As a Christian, he first started walking with the cross after a close friend lost his faith. "I thought I'd walk to the city where he lived and I'd pray each day for him to come back to God. I'm not sure if he ever came back to God, but I thought 'as I'm walking I'll carry a cross as a form of witness'

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"What was amazing was the effect it had on people as I walked into the first town. People would stop their cars and come and talk to me. People would invite me into the pub. Total strangers would say, 'Why are you doing this, what's this all about?'" He says the cross acts as an icebreaker and that as a society we tend to put up too many barriers.

In our Gospel reading we hear Jesus say to his followers: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"*

He had gone away for a few days with his disciples to the far north of the country to a place called Caesarea Philippi – a kind of time out for him and his closest followers. Though, we are told that there was a fairly large company that followed them there. During their time away Jesus took the opportunity to ask his disciples who people thought he was. And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

What is very clear from the following events is that although Peter had made a huge leap of understanding in naming Jesus as the Messiah his understanding of what that actually meant was flawed. Peter and the other disciples expected that he would become a sort of political leader who would rescue the people of Israel from the domination of Roman Rule. When Jesus explained to them that no, his mission was to be arrested and tortured and die for those who were following him. They were horrified and couldn't contemplate such an outcome.

Jesus was very stern when Peter rebuked him and called him 'Satan', which means 'Adversary' In rebuking Jesus Peter was opposing Jesus' mission and causing him very real temptation. To exercise his ministry on earth knowing it would ultimately lead to pain and death was a very difficult thing to do. Jesus must have been tempted to turn away from that route; and to hear Peter suggesting it made him react violently and emphatically: *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your*

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mind not on divine things but on human things.” Peter’s priority was wrong. He misunderstood the role of the Messiah and he misunderstood what it meant to follow him, so Jesus goes on to explain: He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”

Following Jesus was not going to end in a triumphant victory it was going to mean pain and fear and death. Jesus wanted to make that clear to his disciples but he also wanted to make it clear that if they lost their life on earth they would certainly have heavenly life to come.

It’s an interesting approach. As a job description it is startling. Following Jesus will be hugely rewarding but it will also be tough. A bit like the team captain saying to the team before a football match, “Our object today is to let the other team win ten goals to nil!” Most players wouldn’t embrace that as an outcome and the disciples weren’t keen on what Jesus was teaching them. But it was really important that they knew what lay ahead.

So what does it mean for us, as Jesus’s followers today, to take up our lives and follow him?

Does it mean a life of unadulterated gloom and misery? Certainly not! Jesus also said. “*I came that people may have life, and have it abundantly.*” He came to bring us life and hope and joy and peace.

So what does it mean to take up our cross and follow him?

Firstly: It means being known as a follower of Jesus

Arthur Blesset and Lindsey Hamon had no qualms in making that widely known. They took their crosses with them and proclaimed that they were followers of Jesus. The disciples, on the other hand, when the chips were down simply ran away, denied that they knew Jesus and hid. They were afraid to be known as followers of Jesus and it took the infilling of the Holy

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Spirit to transform the fear into confidence. We are not asked to carry enormous crosses around but we are called to show that we are following Jesus by who we are and how we live.

There is a saying that goes like this: If you were arrested and charged with being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you? Of course there are some Christians across the world for whom this is a real issue. For them to show their faith openly can be a matter of freedom and imprisonment or even life and death. But even in our society it can be a problem to us to show our faith to others. We can be afraid of earning derogatory names like 'Bible Basher' or 'God Botherer', we may be anxious about appearing weird or standing out from the crowd by holding different opinions or making ethical stands. It can be tough at work, in school or even at home to show our faith because it can expose us and our faith to ridicule and challenge. But as followers of Jesus we are called to share the Good News of his love and salvation with others and we cannot do that if we remain incognito.

Secondly, we must walk with Jesus in the way he calls us to go

When Peter rebuked him for telling him what was going to happen Jesus responded by saying, "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter wasn't looking at things through God's eyes, he had a thoroughly human perspective. Jesus calls us to walk with him which means living in the way he calls us to and making his priorities our priorities. Or in the words of the Baptism Service submitting to Christ as Lord, allowing him to be boss in our lives. Including him in our decision making, in our life choices and helping us to identify which values are important or simply imposed on us by the society we live in.

That can be difficult, particularly if the people we love and care about don't follow Jesus as we do. It can cause really tough decisions for us and make life difficult. Things like: how we spend our time, how we spend our money, who we spend time with are all things that can cause friction when we share our

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lives with people who have different priorities. We need to find ways of resolving this without causing conflict and yet without compromising our beliefs and this is often not at all easy.

Thirdly, it doesn't mean we are subjecting ourselves to a life of unrelieved misery and gloom.

When I read the Gospels I see that Jesus was the most attractive of human beings. He was someone who loved people deeply and showed it in how he dealt with them and in what he did with them. He was someone who believed in fellowship, in being with others and sharing life with them. He was someone who enjoyed parties and showed huge hospitality in the way he produced wine for a party, fed hungry people and welcomed those who were often on the margins of society.

It's not always easy to tell when reading scripture because we are translating from one language to another and from one society to another but Jesus also enjoyed a good joke. Many of the things he said were actually quite funny and would have provoked responses in his hearers. I imagine that there was a lot of laughter on those journeys across Israel and in the homes he visited.

Knowing Jesus brings with it joy, peace, forgiveness; the knowledge of being deeply loved and the pleasure of being deeply known and understood. It means that we know that we are never alone and that we have the security of having the creator and saviour of the universe caring for us, providing for us and helping us decide the way we should go.

Jesus said: *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,^[1] will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

By running away from Jesus and the challenge he offers us we may think we are saving our life but if we accept his challenge and take up our cross we not only have his presence with us in

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this life but the certainty of his presence with us in the life to come.

Response

Immediately after Peter identifies Jesus as Messiah, Jesus speaks of those who would follow him, denying themselves and taking up their cross.

Think for a moment about something that you would find hard to give up. You might like to cup your hands to show something in your life you find it hard to let go of.

If you wish to while I say this prayer open your hands to show Jesus you are willing to follow him where he calls you,

Prayer

'Lord, you call us to deny ourselves to follow you.

You know what it is we find hard to give up.

Help us to be true to our calling.' **Amen**